

# The Historian in the Archives

## Limitations of Primary Source Materials

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READERS OF *Minnesota History* are accustomed to seeing in these pages major articles that are "history" — that is, the result of the historian's work. The authors of the works we publish identify facets of history that they believe need further illumination or explanation. They ferret out the available source materials in the form of living persons and recorded evidence, evaluate the information supplied by these sources, put the jigsaw together, and give us an interpretation of past events, actions, or figures. Readers of history, as well as the scholars who write it, need to understand the ways in which human factors and the limitations of evidence inhibit the discovery and presentation of a whole, unalloyed truth. Lydia Lucas, head of technical services in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts and one of the profession's experts in the art of organizing and describing archival holdings for research use, offers these reflections on historical sources from the "inside."

<sup>1</sup>On problems of historical analysis and interpretation, see, for example, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York, 1969); Philip C. Brooks, *Research in Archives: The Use of Unpublished Primary Sources* (Chicago, 1969); Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York, 1964); David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York, 1970); Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (Revised ed., New York, 1962); Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, Ill., 1973).

A CRUCIAL ELEMENT in historical methodology is the exploration of primary source materials and the manipulation of them to formulate, develop, verify, and eventually articulate a treatise. Effective use of these materials demands an understanding of their limitations as well as of their values; it also requires the ability to exploit the strengths and compensate for the deficiencies of such materials.

Those who use primary sources themselves or who read their colleagues' writings on the philosophy of history and the art of historical research are soon made aware of the intrinsic limitations of the written vestiges of an earlier time. Many of the fallacies historians are advised to guard against in their own work also infect their sources. Personal documents tend to be biased, couched in the terminology and conceptions of their creators' own time, with a limited range of perception and comprehension, and generally reflective of the frailties of individual human beings. Organizational and institutional records are very little less so; even more than personal papers, they were retained to aid the purposes of their creators rather than the interests of posterity or the requirements of the researcher. Documentation of all sorts is lamentably incomplete as a representation of past reality; only an infinitesimal proportion of the range of past thoughts, actions, reactions, and emotions have been recorded in tangible form, and an even lesser proportion outlives its creator or its immediate function.<sup>1</sup>

The experienced and canny historian is conscious of

these and similar ways in which the content, context, and completeness of primary sources influence fidelity to past reality. He or she can with self-discipline guard against or compensate for them. There exist, however, other related but more subtle factors that affect the scope and quality of documentation in general, governing the historian's research and shaping its conclusions. Less obvious, less predictable, and therefore more difficult to perceive clearly or guard against consistently, they affect not only the interpretation of the sources but also their very existence. The evidential integrity of the documents has been trebly compromised by the time they enter the historian's purview: in their creation, in their preservation, and in their bibliographic control.

ONE IDEAL of historical explanation is that it should take into account the full range of persons, organizations, and institutions of the society it strives to interpret. But much written documentation represents only selected strata of that society. The bulk of personal papers are generated by people who, beyond being merely literate, are articulate enough to feel comfortable about committing their thoughts and experiences to paper. Besides recognizing that their papers reflect the mind-set and lives of educated people, the historian also must bear in mind that these attitudes and experiences may be the *only* ones that are represented in this form.

Organizational records are similarly selective. The best-documented business and commercial enterprises tend to be those that enjoyed a stationary headquarters, a well-organized management, and a period of successful operation — the factors that are most conducive to the systematic creation and retention of records. The records of voluntary organizations reflect the activities of people concerned enough, educated enough, and often leisured enough not only to join in a particular endeavor, but also to reflect their doings purposely. Records of social service and charitable organizations mirror the social conditions that were perceived in their time as constituting problems, focusing on the types of people deemed needful or deserving of assistance. These may or may not correspond to all of the major socioeconomic problems and dislocations that were present or to all of the potential clientele of such organizations. In these instances, too, the distortions go beyond the attitudes and perceptions reflected in the existing documents; they also encompass the presence or absence of any documentation at all about certain aspects of a society.

Another form of distortion resides in the correspondence files of bureaus, agencies, corporations, legislators, and other individuals or organizations that dealt regularly with public issues and concerns. These files are especially likely to constitute a dramatization of conflicts, discontents, and nonconformities. In addition to the biases that characterize personal documents, such cor-

respondence tends to be heavily weighted toward the views of people with stronger feelings, more extreme positions, or deeper personal interests in an issue than constitute their society's norm or than are representative of public opinion as a whole. The mainstream of opinions and problems has no comparable impetus or focus for its expression.

Robert F. Berkhofer distinguished between the roles of actor and observer in defining and interpreting historical situations and behaviors and in evaluating records that yield situational and behavioral evidence. In some instances the presence of yet another participant — the recorder — may be postulated as part of the process of documentation. The recorder surfaces in certain types of documents that are generally assumed to be highly factual and therefore highly accurate, his role being to gather in a systematic manner a prescribed body of information about individuals, events, or society. An awareness of the recorder's presence and an understanding of his or her limitations are crucial to the effective use of source materials so generated. Not only must the recorder depend upon the reliability of the people from whom the data are elicited, but he also injects into their recording personal biases, conceptions, misconceptions, educational levels, attitudes, values, and understanding of terminology.<sup>2</sup>

Among the sources of such personally recorded information that have been most widely used for historical research are the federal and state manuscript censuses. Despite the standard instructions supposedly issued to all census takers, users of these records have noted discrepancies in names and ages from one decade to the next; errors and guesswork in spelling; misconstrual of national origins and ethnic identifications; imperfect correlations between the census sent to Washington, D.C., and the record copy retained by each state; and sometimes actual or suspected fraud. Recorders' biases, current terminology, and the effects of cultural attitudes and assumptions are likewise often remarked by those who use medical and social data from the files of public health agencies, hospitals, social service organizations, schools, and insurance agencies, especially as they concern women and the family.

As historians penetrate more deeply into the study of social structure and family life, they are discovering a multiplicity of factors that can influence who creates the documentation that reflects these aspects of American life and that can distort what is created. Historians of women are the latest to have discovered these distortions; they complain quite justifiably that once women became wives and mothers they were invisible. Documentation of the feminine half of society has suffered from long-standing assumptions that women's observa-

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<sup>2</sup>Berkhofer, *Historical Analysis*, 40–50, 241.



tions and activities are inherently less significant than those of men and therefore less worth saving. Many women themselves have had little sense that the stuff of their daily lives was worthy of record or that their letters, diaries, and mementos might be comparable in interest or worth to those of their husbands. As a result, many personal papers that gravitate into public hands prove to be basically those of the husband, with peripheral input from wife, children, and other relatives. In many instances, especially among rural families, the husband appears to have served as the family's official recorder, incorporating into his diaries and account books, and refracting through his perspective, the activities and concerns of the entire household. Nor were women in earlier times as involved as men in the traditional political, business, professional, and community development pursuits that seem to stimulate the accumulation of significant bodies of records.

THE SOURCE MATERIALS that do find their way into public repositories and are preserved there for research use constitute only a fraction of the total amount that was once created. Major causes of their attrition are: accident and deterioration, selection by the creator, the interests and values of scholars and society, and research and repository logistics. Paper documents, being flammable, organic, and biodegradable, perish quickly when attacked

by fire, water, mold, insects, rodents, acids, and pollutants, or when subjected to excessive fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Judging from the physical condition of many papers that gravitate to public repositories, an incalculable amount of evidence may have vanished simply through the storage conditions under which many were originally kept and the casual and irreverent handling they often seem to have received.

Allan Nevins explored some of the most obvious and frequent settings and causes for the destruction, as well as the noncreation, of documentary evidence in recent times. Widespread reliance on the telephone, the role that unrecorded discussions play in decision making, the reportorial functions of radio and television, and the general decline in the quantity and quality of personal letter and diary writing — all are chronic complaints of the researcher who attempts to penetrate beyond the evidence of an event or a decision to the debates, emotions, influences, and personalities that affected it. The deliberate purging of records that reveal such matters as governmental procedures, adversary strategies, business operations, trade secrets, political horse trading, private personal affairs, and confidential relationships is likewise ubiquitous.<sup>3</sup>

Other gaps in documentation, albeit less deliberate or widespread than these, can have an equal impact on what aspects of the past are documented. Though they are not entirely predictable, neither are they random. For example, the government records that are most like-

<sup>3</sup>Nevins, *Gateway to History*, 189–225.

ly to be preserved are those that serve ongoing administrative needs or whose retention is prescribed by law; the retention of other records is less certain. Collections of personal papers lean more heavily toward what was received than what was written or sent. Businesses and organizations that are willing to surrender into other hands their financial records and correspondence files may continue to hold on to their cherished minute books. Many perceptive, articulate, or active citizens nevertheless cannot conceive of their letters and diaries interesting anyone beyond the immediate family and never consider providing for their preservation. Labor historians have found firsthand documentation of early labor union activities to be scarce and fragmentary, since union leaders feared the consequences of creating letters or memoranda that could fall into enemy hands. More recently, social and political activists have appeared to be uncommonly indifferent and haphazard about such mundane matters as files and records.

ARCHIVAL LOGISTICS, research interests and trends, current methodologies, and the general climate of opinion of the times govern the archivist's selection and acquisition of primary sources as well as their management once they are in archival custody. In an increasingly complex society, source materials have the capacity far to outstrip the time, space, and finances available either to keep or to use them. At the same time, ever-changing research interests and advances in methodology have generated intense pressure on archives to preserve and to provide ready access to a wider variety of resources than in the past.

Archivists have come to regard themselves not merely as the historian's handmaidens and guardians of his treasure but rather as partners and equals, with an independent role to play. In this role, they carry on an intellectual dialogue with the sources analogous to that conducted by the historian, for it is their responsibility not only to comprehend and serve the research demands of the present, but also to anticipate those that may arise in the future. Their task is to try to pass judgment upon which source materials will best contribute to historical research, to judge what the researcher needs to be told about the sources in order to use them, and to attempt thereby to reach a balance in the collecting and processing of those materials that will serve as many of the archivist's clients as is humanly possible. Since those resources will probably never be entirely adequate to this task, researchers using archival holdings must be aware of the extent to which their work will be affected by the archives' capacity to collect, preserve, organize, and describe these materials.

Records and papers, even from the most willing of donors, do not drop like so many ripe apples into the open arms of the waiting archivists. Instead, archivists

must play an active and creative role in analyzing the aspects of the past that most need documentation, in determining what primary sources will best meet this need, in systematically seeking out and taking into custody those that exist, in encouraging potential donors to maintain an adequate record of their activities, and in stimulating the creation of new source materials to fill gaps in the evidence.

Archivists feel a professional obligation to be generalists rather than specialists, to try to cultivate a range of knowledge and breadth of vision that will enable them to mediate among the multitudinous, and often conflicting, demands of their clientele. They look to those who use their collections to keep them attuned to more specific requirements. Although archivists expect to exercise independent judgment in attempting to synthesize these needs and interests into a cohesive collecting policy, their management of collections is as affected by the current climate of opinion as is the historian's use and interpretation of them.

The historian's value judgments not only direct his work in primary sources, they also influence what materials are available for research. An archives must be able to justify — both to itself and to the public or private agencies that support it — the time and money expended in collecting and maintaining a given body of records. The most obvious justification is the current or anticipated use to be made of those records. If researchers consistently decline to utilize a particular type of documentation, then regardless of how vital it may seem to be in reflecting a particular aspect of the past, its survival is in jeopardy. The archives will tend to allot its resources to materials whose current or foreseeable use promises a more immediate or more substantial return on its investment.

Historians studying the infrastructure of society have noted one glaring deficiency in documentation which is directly attributable to this factor. The lives and activities of many social, ethnic, religious, political, or economic minorities have by and large not been accorded the degree of respect (either by society at large or by historians in particular) that encouraged collecting agencies to cherish the tangible evidence of their presence. Consequently, until recent years little conscious effort was made to acquire such evidence. Moreover, although archivists, like historians, tell themselves that they now enjoy a broader vision and are more aware of the nuances and varieties of historical study than was true in the past, only the future can fully reveal what deficiencies may still remain.

Limitations of space and time place far more constraints on archival collecting than please either the archivists or their clients. Many institutions are forced to turn down valuable collections because they have no space to house them; many other collections languish

undiscovered or passed over due to lack of field staff to seek out, contact, and negotiate with their possessors. Unless routed to or discovered by another collecting agency, their most probable fate sooner or later is to perish through accident, deterioration, or deliberate destruction. County and local archives have also been destroyed, even in defiance (or ignorance) of law, after the county courthouse was filled to the brim.

One of the most important influences these logistical limitations exert upon archival collecting is to channel it into the pursuit of source materials that yield the greatest variety of documentation and the largest proportion of useful information in relation to a given investment of time, space, and money. Seeking summary rather than individual records, leaning heavily upon demographic, statistical, and survey data, archivists concentrate more today than in the past upon the records of the countless organizations that a bureaucratized society has spawned. These files tend to yield more information and serve more potential users than would the amount of personal papers that could be acquired with an equal expenditure of staff time. In collecting the latter, archivists will seek out most assiduously those of individuals active in areas of public concern or that involved public contact. In addition, they are most apt to keep letters or diaries that are well-expressed, unique, or typical.

Such considerations have influenced what many historians feel to be the archivist's failure to document adequately the history of the common man. Except for those few substantial, topical collections generated by specific and concentrated documentation projects, it is indeed true that letters, diaries, interviews, and other personal papers of the so-called average American comprise only a small percentage of most archives' total holdings. Yet the "common man" is represented in all his diversity and individuality — and in substantial quantity — in the records of employers, labor unions, legislators, public officials, courts, churches, voluntary and social-service organizations, government bureaus, statistical surveys, mutual benefit associations, and other persons and organizations that interact with the public or with any segment of it. The multiplicity of ways in which these "elitist" collections reflect the milieu from which they arose offers a strong defense for the archivist's emphasis on acquiring them.

THE MERE physical presence of source materials in an archives does not suffice to render them usable for particular research purposes. The processes of seeking out, collecting, and preserving them must be supported by descriptive techniques that reveal their location, their nature, and their content. The same confluence of

values, interests, research uses, and logistics that influences collecting of primary sources surfaces again in their subsequent bibliographic treatment. Evidence of the archivist's intervention can be subtle indeed to one who never saw a given collection in its original state and who has not explored personally the full range of its subject content. Such subjective intervention occurs for each collection of papers in three areas: organization and arrangement, weeding of unwanted items, and analysis of subject content.

Archivists generally follow the time-honored precept of provenance — fidelity to the origins and structural integrity of a group of papers. Provenance governs the arrangement and identification of many records, particularly the structured files of governmental bodies, businesses, and organizations in which an effort is made to retain the order established by their creator. This principle serves to maintain the original context of individual documents and to preserve the relationships among files and between the files and the activities that generated them. It does not, however, lend itself equally well to some other research uses. Subject approaches, in particular, suffer in this regard, since a collection's primary structure commonly reflects chronology or function, with topical data or files often found in several places.

Other distortions may be inherent in file structures that emphasize certain topics. For example, Congressman Joseph E. Karth, unlike his Minnesota colleagues, kept a separate file of background materials and correspondence on Minnesota companies holding defense contracts, which suggests their importance to him or to his district. Bringing all such information together in one place, however, magnifies the visual impression of its quantity and therefore of its significance in relation to the rest of Karth's papers or to those of his colleagues.

In other cases, the physical characteristics and organization of a group of records can impose almost insuperable barriers to their effective use. As a case in point, consider the complexities of using the Illinois Land Records. Their checkered administrative history resulted in related and overlapping records being retained in several different state and federal offices — each of which arranged and indexed (or declined to index) them to serve its own purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Many personal and even organizational papers arrive at the archives with little or no consistent or even discernible structure. In such cases, an arrangement is imposed upon the collection by its cataloger, who tries to judge what will best serve the widest possible variety of research approaches or will be best suited to the requirements of that particular collection. Here, too, some standard practices exist, but their application to specific groups of papers is of necessity left to the archivist's discretion. The soundness of his or her judgment, as well

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<sup>4</sup>Illinois State Archives newsletter, *For the Record*, November, 1975, pp. 3, 8.

as the time available to perfect an arrangement, will affect how suitable it proves to be for the uses that are actually made of the papers. In fact, the archivist's arrangement can actually determine how the researcher uses a large or complex collection.

Archivists have been called today's great destroyers. In their work of organizing a group of papers, they remove duplicate, extraneous, and unusable items. Although archivists and historians generally have agreed on guidelines for the weeding of some types of materials, judgments as to what is extraneous or unusable in most cases remain subjective. In the past, the loss of potentially valuable research materials through weeding has been insignificant compared to its loss through failure to acquire the materials in the first place. However, the unmanageable bulk of modern political, business, and governmental files forces archivists — or their colleagues, the records managers — to retain, through selection or sampling, an ever-decreasing proportion of the total record. Future researchers will almost certainly find a substantial percentage of their primary sources to be summary, representative, or in report form, rather than being particulate, comprehensive, or fully supported by work papers and background files.

The researcher's entree into a collection is through the finding aids prepared for it — the descriptions, box and file lists, indexes, guides, and other reference tools that direct him to the names, topics, or types of materials that may be pertinent to his project. Although finding-aid formats are becoming increasingly standardized, there remains a subjective human element that is inherent in the creation of any analytic bibliographic tool.

The people who catalog manuscript collections are human beings, with their own special interests, gaps in knowledge, political and social viewpoints, prejudices and blind spots, and varying bibliographic skills. Though the archivist can cultivate a sense of objectivity, devise bibliographic formats and techniques designed to mini-

mize the effects of bias, and try to match cataloger to collection, the paragon who can bring to each group of papers a perfectly balanced judgment, impeccable organizational and analytical abilities, and expert background knowledge simply does not exist.

Nor do constraints of staff time permit the recording or indexing of more than a fraction of the persons, organizations, or subjects present in any given collection. In response to persistent demands from historians to "stop making all those g\_\_\_\_\_ d\_\_\_\_\_ finding aids and just get us to the materials," archivists feel increasingly obligated to devote their energies and skills to rendering a maximum amount of material at least minimally usable by a maximum number of people in the shortest possible time.

The researcher who spends much time in archival and manuscript repositories will eventually confront the fact that the entire process of generation, preservation, transmittal, and utilization of primary source materials is inherently subjective and largely beyond his control. The historian can best compensate for archival constraints by cultivating strategies aimed specifically at countering them. The successful researcher will develop a deep enough understanding of his subject to enable him to estimate what documentation should be present, where it might be found, what gaps are most likely to occur, where pertinent collections might be listed or indexed, how to cope with the lack of comprehensive finding aids, and how best to requite the absence of a written record. Most important, one of the finest services researchers can do themselves is to cultivate collegial relationships with archivists, which will give them a voice in a process of document preservation and management that vitally affects the focus, scope, and validity of their research.

THE CARTOON on p. 229 was drawn for this article by Larry Hlavsa.



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